

Governor Belcher Mansion
1046 East Jersey Street
Elizabeth, Union County, New Jersey

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
District of New Jersey

Historic American Buildings Survey
Seymour Williams, A.I.A., District Officer
133 Central Avenue, Rahway, New Jersey

Governor Belcher Mansion
1046 East Jersey Street
Elizabeth, Union County, New Jersey

Owner: Mr. Warren R. Dix

Date of Erection: Eighteenth century; fireback now
in the outer wall of the house
bears date 1742; an addition was
made in 1751; the whole was
renovated in 1898-9

Architect:

Builder: (Probable) A member of the Ogden family

Present Condition: Good

Number of Stories: Two

Materials of Construction: Foundation - stone

Exterior walls - older
section brick; front
Flemish bond; addition
in the rear frame

Interior walls - plaster
with wainscoting and
paneling

Inside brick chimneys

Roof - pitch

Historical Data:

The early owner of the land upon which this
house stands appears to have been Benjamin Ogden who
by will dated 1722 gave the tract to his sons John and

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Benjamin as land "where son John now dwells". It appears that the property remained in the hands of the Ogdens until it was bought by William Peartree Smith. From this it would seem that the house was built by some member of the Ogden family. The date, however, is uncertain. The will of Benjamin Ogden would lead one to believe that there was a house on the property in 1722. When the house was remodeled in 1899, a fireback was found in the easterly wing bearing the date 1742. This may be the date of erection.

Governor Belcher came to live in the house in 1751 and it was enlarged at this time. This addition seems to have been the portion west of the main hall since the west wall of the hall is all brick and the line of junction is easily discernible on the outside. Furthermore, the brick on the front wall east of the entrance are approximately eight and one half by four by two and three-quarters; those to the west are smaller being about eight and one-half by three and three-quarters by two; so that the part built in 1751 appears to be the drawing room and the large bed room.

Jonathan Belcher was an American, born of wealthy parents at Cambridge, Massachusetts on January 8, 1681-2. He was graduated from Harvard in 1699 and after his graduation he was sent to Europe where he made the acquaintance with the Prince who was later to become George I and thus opened the way for political preferment. While he was in England, he became a free mason and was initiated in 1704, thirteen years before the English Grand Lodge was organized, being probably the first American to join the free masons. On his second visit to England in 1729, he was appointed Governor of Massachusetts and New Hampshire. His administration was very unpopular and in 1741 he was removed.

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He took another trip abroad and apparently vindicated himself, for he returned in 1747 as Royal Governor of New Jersey. He first settled in Burlington, but later moved to Elizabethtown leasing and occupying this house which was the seat of government until his death in 1757.

Before coming to Elizabeth, Belcher had granted the College of New Jersey its second charter, the first being defective and inadequate. From the time of the granting of the charter until his death Governor Belcher was active in promoting the welfare of the college. When the college was removed to Princeton and its first building was erected, he gave it the name of Nassau Hall; his own name had been proposed, but he would not permit its use. Just before his death he presented the college with his library of four hundred volumes which was a large collection in those days. Governor Belcher has been termed the patron of the college, and the old mansion has been called "the cradle of Princeton University".

There is some conflict as to the ownership of the house after Governor Belcher's death. The Reverend Mr. Hall stated that he bought the house in 1758. However, it appears that William Peartree Smith owned the property at least from 1766-1784 and he appears to have been a resident of that town in 1758, so that in all likelihood Smith bought the property directly from the Ogdens. Smith was a graduate of Yale and quite famous in his day as a writer; at one time he edited a paper with Governor Livingston. Smith came from a well known New York family. His grandfather had been one of the first mayors of New York and his father, Port Royal Smith, was Governor-General of Jamaica and a friend of Governor Belcher.

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William was a patriot during the Revolutionary struggle. His daughter Katy married Elisa Boudinot; the marriage was one of the great social events of the period.

The next owner of the property was the Reverend David Austin and the house thus became the parsonage of the First Presbyterian Church of which he was pastor from 1788-1797. In 1797 Colonel Aaron Ogden became the owner of the house. He was a descendant of the original Ogden family. He was born in 1756, was graduated from Princeton in 1773, served during the Revolution, and then entered upon the practice of law. He was a Senator from New Jersey, and in 1812 became Governor of New Jersey so that for a second time the house became the Governor's Mansion. During the time he occupied the house many notable men were entertained here. Among these was Lafayette who was entertained by Ogden on his last visit to this country in 1824.

Governor Ogden lost the property and it was bought at Sheriff's sale in 1833 by a son Judge Dayton Ogden from whom it passed to John J. Chetwood as trustee in 1826. It passed from him through Edward C. Mayo, Aaron L. Middlebrook, and F. D. Chetwood to Dr. Charles David who owned it from 1837 to 1858. In 1858 it again became the property of Judge Ogden who conveyed it to Amos Clark in 1865. Clark owned it with the exception of a short period until 1898 when it became the property of Mr. Dix. When Mr. Dix bought the property in 1898 he began restoration.

The wing extending east toward Catherine Street was in such a dilapidated condition that it was pulled down. It was in this wing that the fire-back bearing the date 1742 was discovered. This was placed in the outer wall of the house. The old material was used in the addition in the rear. A modern extension in the rear of the library and east bed room was also removed by Mr. Dix.

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In renovating the house care was exercised to preserve its old features. The only change made in the library was the cutting of a wide entrance door in the hall. The mantel of the library is unusual in design. The drawing room remains practically as it was. The stair case is a fine specimen of colonial work. In the north alcove of the east bed room is to be found a curious old desk built in the wall with shelves above and drawers below. The large west bed room was apparently Governor Belcher's. The mantel in this room is new.

There is a curious old wood lock bound with iron on the front door. This door is in two parts each paneled. The outer plate glass doors came from the old Burr House at Fairfield, Connecticut, built after the Revolution. The original portico was moved forward forming the outer portion of the present entrance.

The timbers are hewn oak, some of them of immense size. The thickness of the walls is realized when it is noted that enough bricks have been removed from some of the windows to accomodate the steam radiators and yet leave a substantial wall outside.

Bibliography:

Mills, W. J. Historic Houses of New Jersey Philadelphia, Lippincott 1902

Hatfield, E. F. The History of Elizabeth, New Jersey New York, Carlton and Lanahan, 1868

Information from the owner


Supervising Historian

Approved:


SEYMOUR WILLIAMS, A.I.A.
District Officer

Rec. Jan. 26-37 T.W.